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SUBJECT: FEARS OF AFGHANISTAN DEBATE EMERGE MONTHS BEFORE NRW STATE  
ELECTIONS

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¶1. (U) Summary: North Rhine-Westphalia Party leaders for the governing Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP) coalition fear the issue of sending more troops to Afghanistan could hurt their chances in the May 2010 state elections if the opposition or the Left Party makes this an issue in their campaigns. The opposition parties, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens, however, have yet to make any noise about Afghanistan. The NRW Left Party aims to cross the five percent threshold and enter the NRW Landtag and could raise populist themes such as withdrawal from Afghanistan to gain support. If the CDU-FDP loses its majority in NRW, this would cost the national CDU-FDP governing coalition its majority in the Bundesrat and would not bode well for the CDU and FDP in other upcoming state elections. End Summary.

CDU: Hopes to Keep Focus on State Issues

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¶2. (SBU) Party leaders from the CDU, FDP, SPD and Greens all discussed the upcoming May 9 NRW state parliament election, their platforms and their chances for success in various meetings with ConOffs on January 21. While all four sets of party leaders agreed that education reform, employment, and communal finances are priority issues for their constituents, CDU Secretary-General Hendrik Wuest emphasized that Afghanistan could be the deciding factor in the election if it became a campaign issue. If the SPD, the Greens, and/or the Left Party come out hard against increasing the German military deployment in Afghanistan and call for an exit strategy, the results would be "a catastrophe" for the governing CDU-FDP coalition, Wuest stated. Because of that, Wuest said, the CDU is happy to continue engaging the opposition on the economy and education, with the clear implication that they do not want the SPD and Greens to focus on anything else. Wuest believes strongly that the CDU can win on these issues, but not on Afghanistan. (COMMENT: Wuest may be overstating the issue, given more recent developments in the SPD at the national level. During the SPD's January 22 Conference on Afghanistan, SPD party leaders did not rule out a troop increase and also acknowledged that their previous distinction between combat troops and trainers does not reflect the new partnering concept. END COMMENT.)

State Opposition Now Focusing on Local Themes

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¶3. (SBU) SPD Deputy Floor Leader Ralf Jaeger did not bring up

Afghanistan as one of the SPD's three primary campaign issues, but rather focused on education reform, job creation and fixing NRW communal finances. When asked by Conoffs about the issue of the deployment in Afghanistan, however, Jaeger said that the SPD needs to be careful when considering future commitments by Germany. The Greens had a similar election theme agenda as the SPD, focusing on environmental, educational and economic issues, and did not think Afghanistan would play a major issue in NRW. The NRW SPD and Greens, however, may be hesitant to bring up Afghanistan, since the German presence there was initiated under an SPD-Greens national coalition government.

14. (SBU) The FDP leaders, NRW Interior Minister Ingo Wolf and Landtag Vice-President Angela Freimuth, both expressed strong skepticism about the ongoing mission in Afghanistan. They agreed that if the opposition or Left Party turns the NRW campaign into a referendum on Afghanistan, the CDU and FDP could be in trouble. Both noted in particular the German public's negative attitude toward the deployment in Afghanistan and historically-grounded reluctance to favor military deployments in general.

Comment

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15. (SBU) The NRW state election is increasingly being referred to as a "mini Bundestag election." It is the only local German election in 2010, with the Bundesrat majority hanging in the balance. As a result, national political leaders are likely increasingly to involve themselves in the NRW campaign; local party leaders have already told us they have more offers from

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national figures than they can field. With such high profile national attention, local leaders could risk losing control of the direction of the debate. The CDU and FDP in NRW and on the national level are clearly aware that there would be negative results for them politically if Afghanistan becomes a major theme closer to the election. At least on the national level, these parties may seek closure on the issue of additional troops to Afghanistan soon after the January 28 Afghanistan Conference to avoid the risk of the issue being debated shortly before the NRW elections. With the Left Party in NRW currently polling at the five percent mark, they stand to gain the most from a debate on Afghanistan. Left Party Chairman Oskar Lafontaine's decision to leave national politics could distract the party for the time being, but not for long. They sense how close they are to entering the Landtag in this populous western state, and if the party shows any signs of weakening in the NRW polls, it could resort to tough tactics on Afghanistan to pull through. End comment.

16. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.  
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